

Research & Policy Brief Series

ISSUE NUMBER 35/MAY 2010

Poverty and Food Insecurity in the United States*

By Thomas A. Hirschl and Katherine L. Dickin, Cornell University

What is the Issue?

The current recession pushed the number of Americans in poverty to the 40 million mark for only the second time since 1960, and there are indications that this surge will continue until the recession ends. Many view the nation's high poverty rate as a failure of policy, a failure that is cumulatively evident over the past 30 years, and forecast little hope for near-term improvement¹. Thus, there is a practical need to assess what can be done in the near term to ameliorate poverty, and to situate policy analysis and education about poverty within a practical framework.

In this policy brief we examine food insecurity - a critical manifestation of poverty. Although hunger and poverty in the United States are not the same as in less developed countries where 56 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 per day², and approximately one in eight persons are malnourished³, there is still widespread "food insecurity" in the United States. We describe recent trends in poverty and food insecurity, examine national programs targeted towards ameliorating these conditions, and make the case for locally-oriented action.

The connection between poverty and food insecurity

Food insecurity is defined by the absence of "consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life"⁴. Poverty is related to food insecurity because: 1) the vast majority of food insecure families have incomes below, or slightly above, the poverty line, and 2) food insecurity rates decline precipitously as family income moves above the poverty line⁵.

Furthermore, food insecurity is related to poverty in the U.S. because the official measurement of poverty reflects the cost of basic necessities, in particular the cost of food. Developed in 1963, the poverty measure consists of thresholds in family income relative to family size. For example, in 2008 a family of four was considered poor if its total income was less than \$22,025 per annum. Since 1970 the annual poverty rate for individuals has varied between 11 and 15 percent⁶. Poverty rates tend to trend up during periods of economic recession, and trend down when the economy expands.

When we look at the *cumulative* risk of poverty over people's lifetimes, there is evidence that *more* than 15 percent of Americans have experienced poverty at some time during

their lives. This perspective examines an individual's risk of moving in and out of poverty over a period of several years rather than just determining if one is poor or not at a particular time. There is evidence that this cumulative risk has increased over the past 40 years. Data from a representative national sample⁷ indicates that a slight majority of Americans (51 percent) experience poverty for at least one year between the ages of 20 and 65. There is also evidence that cumulative poverty risk increased between 1968 and 2000⁸. These increases are not surprising, considering that overall economic risk is also growing as a result of more Americans losing their health insurance, becoming unemployed, experiencing work-related disabilities, and/or becoming increasingly burdened by consumer debt. Accordingly, families are also more likely to experience food insecurity sometime during their lives than was true in the past.

Food insecurity is most common among individuals and families who experience what the Census Bureau refers to as "deep poverty", e.g., having a household income below 50 percent of the poverty line (less than \$11,013 per year for a family of four). Of the poverty population, this segment is growing disproportionately rapidly. Not only did deep poverty increase for all age groups between 1968 and 2000 (see Figure 1), but also during the current poverty surge. The Census Bureau reports that 58 percent of the increase in poverty between 2007 and 2008 was deep poverty^{1,9}.

Figure 1: The Incidence of Deep Poverty Across the U.S. Life Course, 1968–2000

